

PAM 636-294

IN REPLY REFER TO:

Land Operations
Reindeer
1960



UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS GENERALLY ASKED CONCERNING ALASKA REINDEER

Reindeer were introduced into Alaska throughout the period 1891-1902. Twelve hundred eighty (1280) animals were established mostly at Teller on the Seward Peninsula. Purpose of importations was to provide food for Eskimos in view of the threatened game depletion and establish an industry for Eskimo people.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin #207 (no longer in print) lists 200,000 square miles of range land in Alaska especially suited to raising reindeer. The bulletin states that "the carrying capacity of such an area should be approximately 4,000,000 reindeer."

All reindeer in Alaska are owned by Eskimos or by the U.S. Federal Government.

Skins are utilized for bedding and the making of garments. The meat including heart, liver and tongue is used for food. Some is sold on commercial markets.

Reindeer can be used for packing. A few are still used for drawing sleds for herd camps in the winter.

Some live reindeer are sold to purchasers in the south 48 States each year for display purposes.

A small well balanced herd (1200 reindeer) on the Alaska mainland can be expected to show a 55 to 60% fawn crop each season. The percentage is calculated on the number of adult females only. Some yearlings will generally have fawns also.

The average full grown reindeer in Alaska stands about 10-1/2 hands high (42 inches). An adult steer or bull, 4 to 5 years of age, may stand near 50 inches tall. A good steer in prime condition killed in November may dress 200 pounds.

Reindeer fawns at birth weigh from 7 to 16 pounds and will double their birth weight in 14 to 16 days.

Vegetation on reindeer ranges comprises a mixture of lichens, shrubs, sedges, weeds, grasses, and mosses. Lichens are the preferred feed for winter range.

Hummocky ground predominates on the lower slopes. Alder is found along the stream courses. Some dwarf willows are found in open tundra country.

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It is the opinion of the Area Land Operations Officer in charge of reindeer, year 1960, that reindeer do not require a high protein diet.

To reach lichen forage in the winter reindeer will paw through several feet of snow. Lichen will always be found at the spot where they paw through. The lichens run high in moisture and are particularly relished by reindeer when both water and snow are lacking.

During fawning season, mid-April through May, the females may be found grouped by themselves. The males whose antlers are soft at this period will be grouped by themselves.

Female reindeer will return to the same area each year for fawning. This makes a herd exceptionally difficult to hold during the first year of establishment.

In early summer reindeer select windswept areas and water to escape insects. Later in the summer, latter July and August, the reindeer gain rapidly in weight. Steers will be in prime condition by November. Bulls fatten the fastest, are in top condition in September and lose weight from then on thru the rutting season which ends ordinarily in November. The older males drop their antlers almost immediately following rutting season. Yearling males may carry their antlers until early spring. Females drop their antlers following fawning.

Reindeer are quite tractable and easily herded in one locality during winter months if the feed is good. Herding is done on foot with a minimum of aid from herd dogs. The nature of grazing areas is such that reindeer can be nearly impossible to herd during the mosquito and warble-fly season in summer months.

Probably from 30 to 100 acres might be required for year long grazing of each reindeer, depending upon how much of the terrain is covered by lakes, the types of vegetation available, and how much of the terrain is suited for summer range, how much for winter, fall and for fawning range.

The handling, marking, castrating, and counting of reindeer is done thru a series of progressively smaller circular corrals and pockets leading into an outgoing chute. Handling along the coast is usually done during the month of July. Back from the coast 70 to 100 miles, handling is usually done in November but as late as March. February is probably plenty late for handling. There has been a number of still-born and aborted fawns as a result of handling in March.

Reindeer will cross with caribou. Herders don't care for the cross or for the intermingling of caribou and reindeer. They cannot herd caribou and when mixed in the herd it is very difficult to herd reindeer.



Caribou are larger, come into rut about 2 weeks later, have longer legs, a proportionately more shallow body, a more pronounced hump over the shoulders, longer necks, more uniformity of color and experienced handlers will point out minor differences such as in the tuft of hair growing out of the ears.

Reindeer can be taught to lead and to drive about as easily as can a horse. In intelligence the reindeer may rank slightly below the horse. Because the reindeer is so much smaller an untrained reindeer is much easier to handle than a horse.

The reindeer is a very good traveler. His feet are large and he is exceptionally good in the snow though he has difficulty on ice. Two good reindeer will draw a load in deep soft snow (18" to 24" deep) that would not be handled by possibly 10 dogs. A reindeer must eat frequently to give good service though he takes his nourishment from the land. It is not practical to use reindeer in most camps now because of the great number of dogs.

We receive many requests from people who would like to obtain a few reindeer as pets. Dr. Jack Davenport of Redmond, Oregon; John Zumstein of Redmond, Oregon, and a few others in the south 48 States have some reindeer and Mr. John Zumstein has sold a few.

To procure reindeer in Alaska it is necessary to be here and receive the reindeer at the herd. When the reindeer are tied they are the property of the purchaser and must be paid for. We must know that the purchaser is coming and preparations made for 2 weeks in advance. We have no roads in reindeer country. Flying conditions, particularly landing conditions near reindeer herds, can be impossible. The price of female adult reindeer at the herd is \$135 each and the price of adult males is \$125 each. The price of fawns is \$100 each. The initial purchase price can be only a small part of the total cost delivered Stateside, particularly if several of a small number purchased should die enroute.

Reindeer are quite adaptable and will live on grain, hay and pasture feed. Reindeer moss packed in sacks is generally required for the southbound trip while enroute to the south 48 States. The moss is mixed with oatmeal or a commercial mix until the deer learn to eat the new feed.

Reindeer have been transported south by water, by highway from Fairbanks, Alaska, and by aeroplanes (bush and mainline) from the reindeer camps in northwest Alaska, but it is not a "Farm to Market" operation.

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